
INTRODUCTION



Figure 9: An aerial view of OTR. Photo courtesy of Daniel Young.

There have been many neighborhood plans for Over-the-Rhine (OTR) over the last several decades. In fact, there have been books written about OTR and why it is what it is. At various times it has embodied the best and the worst of Cincinnati, and maybe urban America. The architecture and streetscapes, parks and institutions of OTR remind us of a time when cities were king and people of all income levels lived in densely populated neighborhoods just blocks from downtown. The economies of these places were thriving, churches and institutions were busy centers of community life, and people provided their neighbors and friends a helping hand. This may be a romanticized view of life in American cities and in OTR 50 years ago, but that memory is one of the reasons OTR is such a symbol of the power of urban life.

The OTR community is located in the heart of the City of Cincinnati, north of the Central Business District and is surrounded by the West End, Mt. Auburn and Clifton Heights neighborhoods. It is symbolic of many inner cities' challenges - ravaged by economic disinvestment, crime and poverty. OTR has a wealth of individuals and organizations that have invested countless hours working to enhance the quality of life for all interest groups.

This is a different kind of plan. With the support of Mayor Luken and City Council, it sets the stage for the city's commitment to the revitalization of this very important neighborhood. As we create a new plan for OTR, we hope to provide vision and direction to all stakeholders in the neighborhood in order to reestablish it as the symbol of all that can be right with central-city neighborhoods in urban America.

The Plan Vision

The plan is based on the vision of a neighborhood that celebrates the diversity of its people and cultures in a community where the architecture and character provide a nurturing, enriching environment for everyone who lives, works and visits there. Young or old, rich or poor, black or white, it will be a neighborhood where there are economic, social, and cultural opportunities for anyone who wishes to participate.

Planning Process

This planning process was originally initiated based on a recommendation from the Urban Land Institute (ULI). In 1997, the City contracted with ULI to examine the potential development opportunities in the OTR community. One of the recommendations that resulted from their work was “that a coalition organization, which can serve as an ‘honest broker’ between diverse neighborhood factions and build consensus for planned improvements be established.” Following this recommendation, a group of volunteers worked to establish the OTR Coalition. The Coalition opened an office, recruited stakeholders, provided resident training and began to put together a planning process. The City Planning Department provided further assistance to the effort and broadened the planning partnership to include the OTR and Pendleton Community Councils, the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Residents’ Table and others. A Steering Committee was ultimately established to oversee the planning process.

The Steering Committee

The Planning Steering Committee (PSC) is a group of residents, institutions, businesses and other stakeholders who were charged with overseeing the planning process. The committee was established in cooperation with the Coalition, the Community Councils and the Residents Table as the most appropriate and representative groups in the neighborhood. The PSC consists of representatives from the OTR Coalition, Community Council, Housing Network, Resident’s Table, businesses, social service agencies, institutions, and residents. This 27-member committee (please see list of members in credit section) was charged with monitoring the planning process, being actively involved in the issue committees, and soliciting volunteers and community input. The PSC held dozens of working meetings, sponsored several community public meetings, and hosted several visioning charrettes.



*Figure 10: One of the first meetings of the 27-member Steering Committee.
Photo Courtesy of Julie Fay.*

The Community Visioning Process

Over 200 community stakeholders also joined Kenneth Cunningham and Associates, with the UC Community Design Center and Olika Design, in a community visioning process to discuss and create the physical and design recommendations that accompany the policy recommendations developed in the four issue committees and the steering committee.

The process included day long working meetings on several Saturdays with neighbors and stakeholders from all over the neighborhood. People toured the neighborhood together, looking at the area from their own and each other's perspective. After that activity, people attended additional Saturday sessions to create the concepts for each of the target areas identified in the issue committees. Participants worked with a team of urban designers who then translated their ideas into the many urban design solutions that are presented throughout this report.



Figure 11: Community members participate in a Saturday morning charrette at the OTR Recreation Center. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Cunningham and Associates.



Figure 12: The charrette board after a day of participation. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Cunningham and Associates.

For more detailed information about the Community Visioning Process hosted by Kenneth Cunningham and Associates, please see Appendix A.

The Issue Committees

In addition to the PSC, there were four issue committees that worked to develop recommendations. The committees were the Housing Committee, the Economic Development Committee, the Transportation Committee and the Quality of Life Committee. Membership in these committees was open to anyone who was interested. These committees, chaired by members of the PSC, discussed their issues in great detail. They heard from experts in various fields and neighborhood and city representatives on current projects and future plans. In addition, they shared ideas for change and improvements, identified issues around their topics and developed goals and strategies to address those issues. Countless community meetings were held to address topics diligently and to discuss difficult and often contentious issues. The progress made in these issue committees represents the basis for the recommendations made in this plan.

Community Meetings

Three public community meetings were held to solicit participation in the process and to obtain OTR stakeholders' input about their neighborhood. Throughout the meetings, several strengths and opportunities were discussed. The following chart provides a list of general comments gathered at the public meetings:

<i>Assets</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Desires</i>
Resourcefulness and commitment of stakeholders	Concern about displacement	Resident empowerment
Sense of community	Employment opportunities	Enhanced youth programs
History and diversity	Government mistrust	Shared vision
Access to services and public transportation	Parking and pedestrian safety	Improved internal & external transportation connectivity

Figure 13: Comments gathered at Community Meetings

Stakeholder Interviews

In addition to community and formal meetings, the City Planning Department staff conducted dozens of one-on-one interviews with other community stakeholders. These interviews were designed to gain information on future plans, impressions and ideas for change, and improvements in the neighborhood. These personal interviews were helpful for people not comfortable with sharing ideas in a public setting.

Key Community Issues

Based on the many means of input into this process, four major issues emerged in many different ways. These issues and the lack of consensus on how to deal with them have hampered redevelopment in OTR for more than a decade.

1. Lack of Investment - How do we stimulate new investment that will help existing residents and bring new people into the neighborhood?

Over-the-Rhine has lost 19,939 people since 1960. The major decrease, 12,552 people, occurred between 1960 and 1970. This loss of population has been coupled with a loss of economic activity. In 1970, there were 527 operating businesses and 76 vacant businesses. Today, there are approximately 326 businesses (2001 Haines Directory). This exodus of both population and economic investment from the neighborhood has left almost 500 buildings standing empty and hundreds of vacant lots where buildings occupied with homes and businesses once stood. The loss of people, dollars, and jobs has meant a spiral of disinvestment that has left this neighborhood with very few opportunities, and in some cases, deep hopelessness.

There are businesses, however, that continue to make investments and residents who have stayed through all the hard times. The committed residents and businesses that remain in the neighborhood today will be the backbone of the revitalization.

2. Displacement - How do we ensure that there is room in a revitalized neighborhood for current residents to stay and participate equally in the community?

Does revitalization in OTR mean that current low-income residents will be priced out of the market? There are certainly enough examples across the country of revitalization leading to significant displacement of existing residents. There was discussion throughout the entire planning process that the objective of the process is a mixed-income community that does not displace existing residents. This remained, however, one of the most controversial issues of the process. Those who advocate for the poor were sure that they will not fare well, and had very little trust that the city or for-profit developers had their interest in mind. Likewise “market” interests feel as though the low-income residents and advocates have created a neighborhood where no one else is welcome and market projects have little chance of success.

3. Crime and Its Perception - How do we get rid of the crime and violence that plagues the neighborhood?

Crimes, largely associated with drugs and drug trafficking, have been a significant issue for decades in OTR. Keeping existing residents and businesses safe and feeling comfortable in their environment is a critical need in the community. A combination of the presence of many opportunistic outsiders conducting criminal activity and the local and national spotlight on racial tensions make solutions difficult. Cincinnati Community Action Now (CAN), a non-profit group established as a result of a series of civil disturbances that primarily impacted OTR in April 2001, assembled to develop strategies to enhance racial diversity in the City of Cincinnati and the mediation process. Their efforts, as well as those of the Community Problem-Oriented Policing (CPOP) Program, will help to address the issue of

police-community relations. The Violent Crimes Task Force of the Police Department was also designed to address the issue of crime. In many ways, this is the “watershed” issue; if it is not successfully addressed, progress in other areas will be almost impossible.

4. Sense of Community - How do we encourage old and new residents to respect each other and form one diverse community?

The issue of how residents, merchants and businesses will get along is not a topic usually addressed in a traditional planning process. But this issue, and its many forms, is at the center of creating a viable, mixed-income community that sustains itself over a long period and is a place where everyone wants to live. Making people feel respected, welcomed, valued and connected is a tall order. It is these very issues that cause many to be distrustful and suspicious; it is this that will be the true measure of success in the long-term.



Figure 14: Community members participate in a design charrette. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Cunningham and Associates.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

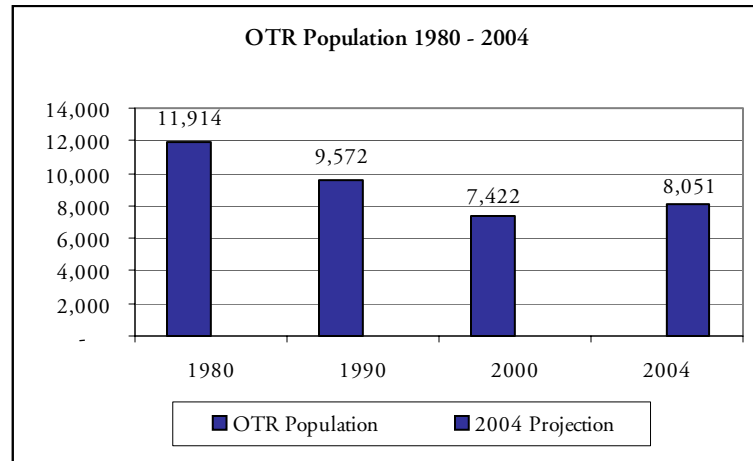


Figure 15: OTR Population 1980 - 2004

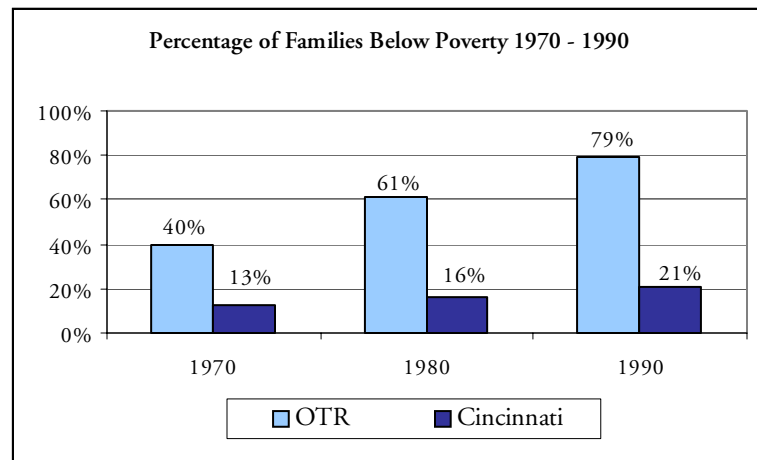


Figure 16: Percentage of families below poverty 1970 - 1990

The disinvestment in OTR is characterized by a significant population loss from the neighborhood's peak population year (1900). This drop in population is partially the result of the movement of population away from the inner city due to modern transportation, social and economic patterns. Within the last few decades, the decrease can be attributed to the disinvestment in the neighborhood.

Another significant change was race. During the 1960s and 1970s, although OTR's population declined, the African American population began to increase. This increase is perceived by many as a result of African Americans being displaced from the West End and Queensgate communities due to the construction of I-75, which began in the late 1950s.

OTR's population tends to be poorer and younger than the rest of the city. In 1990 and 2000, OTR's population under the age of 18 was 35% and 29% respectively, compared to the city's 29% and 24%. By 2000, OTR's under-18 population had dropped to 29%, which is still higher than the citywide total of 24%. At the same time, there are fewer senior citizens in OTR than citywide. See Appendix B for a complete list of demographics for OTR.

OTR's median household income remains much lower (\$5,908 in 1990) than the city's median household income of \$21,006 in 1990. The 2004 projected median income is \$9,042 for OTR and \$32,278 for the city (1999 Claritas Data File). In 1990, the percentage of families in OTR below the poverty level was 79%, which is significantly higher than the city's average of 20%.

The educational attainment of OTR residents has been increasing since 1980. Since 1980, there has been a 15.5% increase in the number of residents who are high school graduates, an 8.2% increase of those who have had some college and a 5% increase of those who are college graduates.

Land Use and Zoning

The OTR Community is a mixed-use commercial and residential community. Distinctive land use patterns are mixed commercial/residential along Vine and Main Streets, large institutional and office uses along Central Parkway and Central Avenue, one- and two- family units in Mohawk and areas surrounding Rothenberg School, and industrial uses north of Liberty Street along McMicken Avenue. Many of the retail and small businesses are located on the first floor of two-to-four-story buildings throughout the neighborhood. The neighborhood has significant open space in Washington Park and several other green spaces and park areas. Some of the most significant institutions from a land use standpoint are: Findlay Market, located north of Liberty Street; Music Hall, located south of Liberty Street; and St. Francis Church, located at Liberty and Vine Streets. Figures 18 and 19 graphically illustrate this mix of land uses.

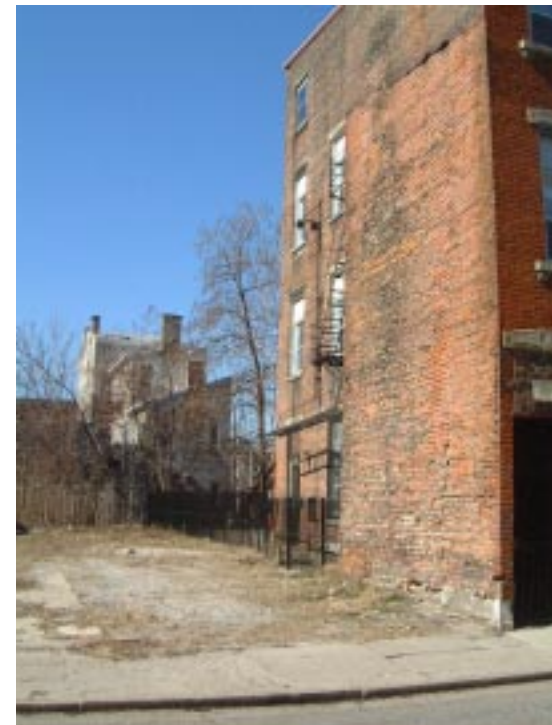
The community contains 24 zone districts ranging from R-7, High-Density Residential, which permits some business use and housing at a density of 79 units per acre, to 0-2, Office Zone, to M-2, Manufacturing Zone District. (Please see Figure 18.) This is a result of the highly mixed land use patterns in the neighborhood.

There are 703 scattered vacant parcels in OTR based on an inventory conducted by the City Planning Department staff in early 2001. The majority of the sites are small, less than a quarter of an acre. The parcels average from 1,927 to 3,149 square feet of land area. A significant number of the parcels are located in Mohawk, the area surround-

ing Rothenberg School and along major thoroughfares such as Main, Vine, Race and Elm Streets.

Urban Renewal

Almost the entire OTR community is located within an urban renewal boundary. This boundary was established in 1985 as a result of the 1985 OTR Community Plan and a study determining that the area was blighted. The study documented that there were a number of significant buildings and infrastructure in the OTR community that qualified as deteriorating and blighted areas. The urban renewal status provides the city the opportunity to acquire property needed for a public purpose and to use federal funds to improve conditions and eliminate blighting influences.



*Figure 17: A vacant lot on Republic Street.
Photo courtesy of Kenneth Cunningham and Associates.*

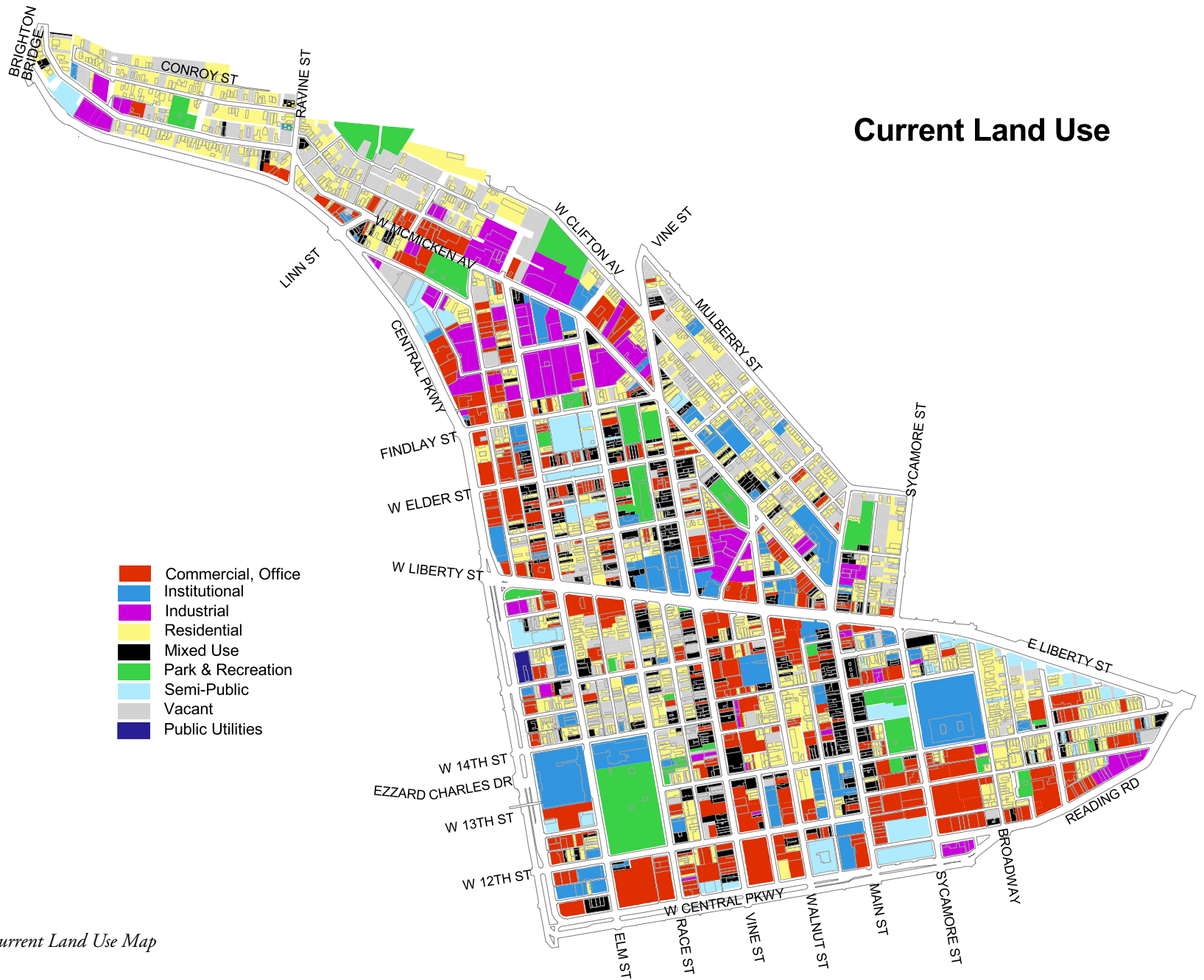


Figure 18: Current Land Use Map

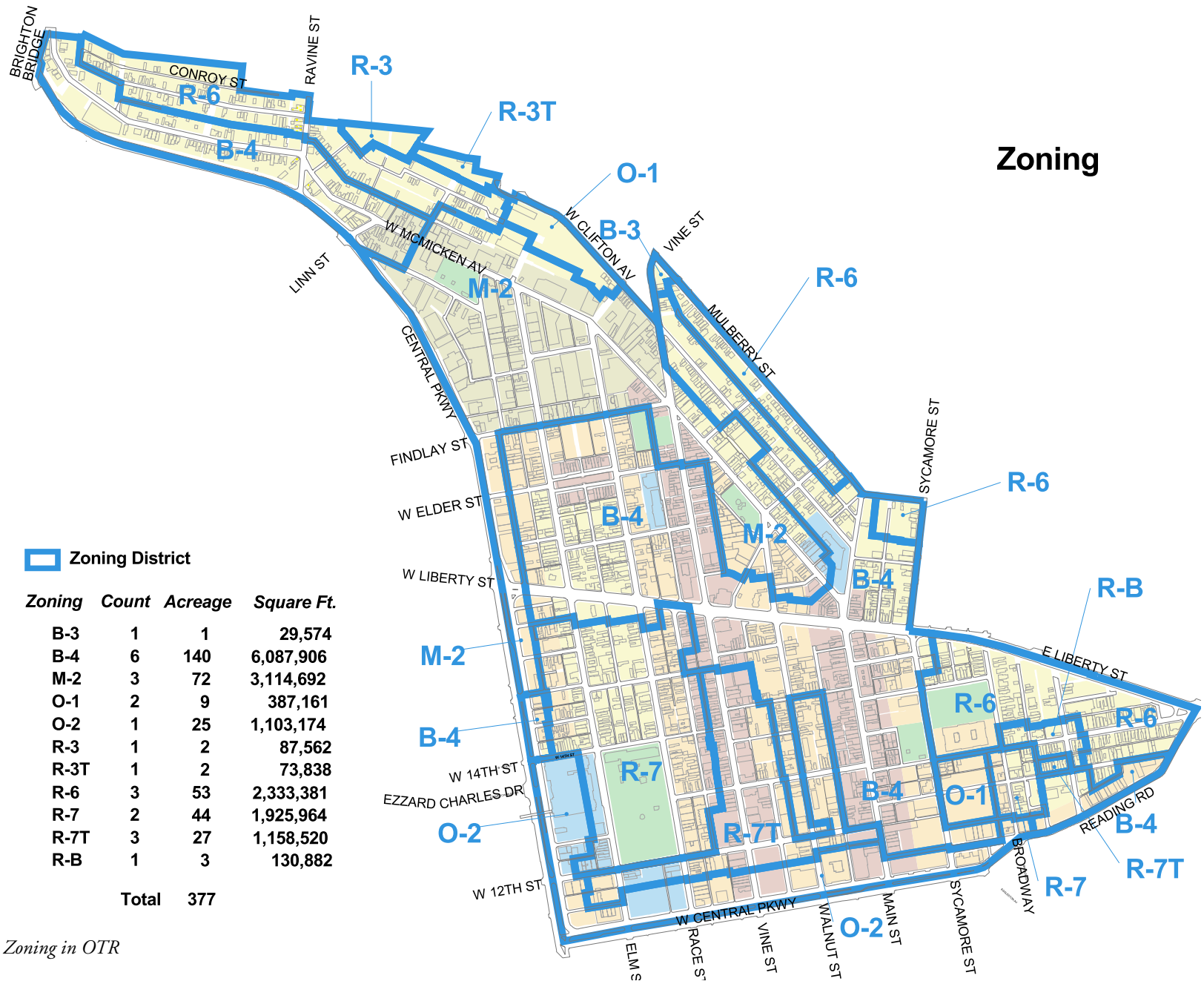


Figure 19: Zoning in OTR

Current Housing Inventory

Because of the importance of this issue and considerable discussion around the facts of housing in OTR, the city contracted with consultant Mark Brunner to undertake a detailed inventory of housing in the neighborhood. The majority of the inventory was conducted in 1999-2000. It identified 5,412 habitable housing units (units that are currently occupied and those that are vacant but could be occupied without renovations) in the neighborhood. The 2000 Census, on the other hand, identified a total of 5,261 habitable units of which 3,594 were occupied and 1,667 were not occupied. (The rent ranges from the 2000 Census are not available at this time.)

Total Habitable Housing Units	
2000 Census	5261
Brunner Study	5412

Figure 20: Total Habitable Housing Units

By either source - Brunner's total count of 5,412 or the Census count of 5,261 housing units there has been a considerable drop in housing units from the 1980 count of 7,406 housing units and the 1960 count of 10,885.

The number of low-income units has been declining for a number of years. The 1985 OTR Comprehensive Plan identified 5,520 units as being low-income. It is not clear if this number reflects only rent-restricted units and/or vouchers. (The 1985 plan did not mention market rate housing, mixed income housing or home ownership in its Goals and Objectives, but focused solely on maintaining and stabilizing the existing low-income housing units in the community.) The Brunner study identified 3,200 rent restricted units. This number has decreased to about 2,400 during this planning process due to Hart Realty's recent decision to opt out of the Section 8 Program. Hart Realty's decision impacted 826 units. It is likely that the trend of gradual attrition in the number of available housing units for low-income residents will continue.



Figure 21: Vacant and occupied housing units on Magnolia Street.

Vacant and Condemned Buildings

There are many buildings in OTR that have been condemned by the City of Cincinnati. These buildings are considered to be a public nuisance and/or safety hazard because while they are slated for demolition, they are still standing. The city also identifies buildings, vacant in whole or in part, that require a Vacant Building Maintenance License (VBML). A VBML is issued by the City of Cincinnati's Director of Buildings and Inspections and is renewed yearly. For an owner to receive a VBML, the building must be structurally sound, weather tight and secure from trespassers.

The number of vacant buildings in OTR presents both a present challenge and a future housing opportunity. The presence of so many vacant buildings in the neighborhood has a measurable negative impact on quality of life issues. Vacant buildings can be used for various criminal activities including drug trafficking and prostitution. Rows of boarded up buildings rob streets of vitality and create the impression of deterioration and neglect. The investment required to stabilize and rehabilitate a vacant building in OTR is substantial. Renovation of an abandoned building often requires the abatement of hazardous materials and extensive upgrades, including new plumbing, new electrical wiring and the installation of sprinkler/fire suppression systems.

OTR's vacant and underused buildings are indeed assets, and many can be salvaged and returned to productive use. This is largely because the buildings are of historic character and are irreplaceable in their architectural quality. The city's effort to save these buildings was demonstrated by the OTR Pilot Receivership Program, which was administered by the Abandoned Buildings Company (ABC) through the Department of Neighborhood Services from 1997-2001. ABC filed a number of "public nuisance" lawsuits against owners of vacant

and deteriorated buildings in OTR. The purpose of the lawsuits was to compel owners to take action to stabilize their buildings and meet Building Code Standards as a first step in achieving full renovation of the buildings. ABC has recommended that the Receivership Program be continued to stabilize at least 75 of the buildings that are still vacant and not immediately habitable in OTR.

There are vacant buildings in the neighborhood that are not economically feasible candidates for renovation. Buildings that are structurally unsound will eventually need to be demolished, providing space to provide parking or other amenities for nearby historic buildings that can be renovated. These decisions will need to be made on a case-by-case basis.



Figure 22: A vacant building on 13th Street

Historic Resources

Like so many things about OTR, its historic resources are a source of great pride and opportunity, and represent a significant challenge. OTR's historic character holds the potential for a great resurgence and revitalization. It is what allows this neighborhood to set itself apart from so many other places in the region. It also makes renovation extremely difficult, as buildings need new modern systems, structural repairs and upgrades for things never imagined when these buildings were built - air conditioners, computer hook-ups, sprinkler systems or tenants with cars.

OTR's collection of commercial, residential, religious and civic architecture is one of America's largest and most cohesive surviving examples of an urban, nineteenth-century community. The exceptional historical and architectural significance of the neighborhood is recognized both nationally and locally. In 1983, a large portion of OTR was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and contains the city's two largest locally designated historic districts. The City of Cincinnati created the OTR South Historic District in 1993. Less than a decade later, during this planning process in 2001, the city undertook efforts to establish the OTR North Historic District and Mohawk Neighborhood Business District.

Local designation of historic resources provides access to invaluable investment tools for revitalizing OTR. Buildings located in OTR's National Register District are eligible for Federal historic preservation tax incentives. This program, which gives money back to property owners who rehabilitate buildings according to certain standards, fosters private-sector investments. Over 260 tax credit projects have been undertaken in the OTR National Register District since 1983. Of this number, 122 projects have been completed in the project study area.

Similarly, the design guidelines created for the locally designated OTR North and South Historic Districts provide a framework for continual revitalization. They were written specifically to address the community's unique historical, architectural, developmental, social and economic characteristics and are enforced by the City Planning Department's Office of Historic Conservation.

OTR also includes a number of individually significant buildings: Old St. Mary's Church (123 E. 13th Street) and Cincinnati Music Hall (1234 Elm Street) are both local landmarks. Music Hall is also one of the city's ten National Historic Landmarks. Thirteen additional buildings in OTR are individually listed on the National Register. (Please see Appendix C.)



Figure 23: Music Hall, one of the City's ten National Historic Landmarks.

Social Support in Over-the-Rhine

OTR is home to numerous social service organizations, offering assistance ranging from homeless shelters, soup kitchens, medical clinics, job placement and chemical and substance abuse treatment. These agencies provide services to residents of OTR and other nearby neighborhoods. Please see Appendix D for a list of social service agencies identified by the neighborhood.

Through this process, there have been discussions related to the many social service providers in the neighborhood with a varied range of opinions. Some stakeholders had concern that there are too many social service organizations in OTR, thereby perpetuating the culture of poverty in the neighborhood. Others saw that social service organizations work very hard to improve the lives of people in the neighborhood, but do so with limited resources and do not receive enough support. Some reported that some individuals or groups seem to simply want to “sweep poor people under the rug.”

Both sides of this issue have valid reasons for their concern. OTR does carry a significant burden for the city with regard to the number of social service agencies located within the neighborhood (the number approaches 90, including churches that provide services as well). The neighborhood’s extensive selection of social service agencies has made it a convenient place to live for those seeking assistance. OTR residents have explained and are proud of the notion that the neighborhood is a place where things are done differently, where there is a network of community support and where there is a grassroots movement for the rights of the poor. Together, all of these factors attract people who are looking for a second chance.

On the other hand, many feel that by making the neighborhood so convenient for people who are homeless and people with addictions, it makes it less attractive for visitors and future development. Families with young children may not feel comfortable using parks acting as home to large numbers of homeless men, or shopping or walking through areas frequented by drug dealers and users. This situation speaks to the concerns about safety and the perception of safety in the neighborhood as well.

The overarching goal of the plan is to improve the lives of all current residents of OTR. If drastic improvements are made in the quality, quantity and affordability of local housing, the safety and cleanliness of the neighborhood and the availability of economic opportunities, then there may some day be a need for fewer of the existing social service agencies or some may need to redefine their mission.
